

Does a song conjure painful memories? Try to rehabilitate it, say scientists

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What are the songs from your teenage years or early adulthood that you have the strongest memories of?
2. Which of those songs are connected to pleasant memories and which to painful memories?
3. What effect do songs that are connected to painful memories have on you?

2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to re them in context.

paired with	engage	joyful	stirring up	rehabilitate
attached	enhance	oeuvre	pin down	
dearth	arousing	overpowers	recollection	
associated	evokes	rewires	humming	
evicted	induced	skip	along	

1. causing a strong feeling, like excitement, interest or anger _____
2. to like or care about someone or something strongly _____
3. extremely happy _____
4. the ability to remember something _____
5. all the works (books, music, art, etc.) made by one artist. _____
6. caused something to happen _____
7. causing strong feelings or trouble _____
8. to clearly explain or decide something; to identify exactly _____
9. brings a memory, feeling or image into the mind _____
10. connected one thing with another in your mind _____

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11. controls or defeats someone or something using great strength _____
12. to help someone return to a normal, healthy or useful life _____
13. joined two things or people together _____
14. making a low sound with your voice while music is playing _____
15. forced someone to leave their home _____
16. to make something better or stronger _____
17. to move lightly with small jumps; not do something _____
18. puts in new wires; changes the way something works inside _____
19. to take part in something or get involved _____
20. a lack or shortage of something _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. Their wedding song made everyone feel _____.
2. The singer tried to _____ the audience by asking them to clap.
3. The kids were _____ from the house because they played their music too loudly.
4. The emotion of the moment _____ her, and she had to stop.
5. The concert was _____ strong feelings of excitement in the crowd.
6. The calm music helped to _____ a feeling of peace in the room.
7. That old tune can _____ memories of my past relationships.
8. She likes to _____ when her boyfriend plays the guitar.
9. Playing piano can _____ the brain because the left hand moves separately from the right hand.

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10. People say you shouldn't _____ ice cream _____ hot sauce, but I think it works!
11. My _____ of our first date is listening to that song together.
12. I always _____ this song with dancing with my best friend.
13. He needed help to _____ after such a long illness.
14. He hated the song and _____ it every time it came on.
15. Decoration and music can _____ a romantic dinner.
16. She is very _____ to her old guitar and doesn't want to sell it.
17. The new museum show includes the complete _____ of the painter.
18. It's hard to _____ the style of this song because it mixes jazz and rock.
19. This song _____ memories of my childhood holidays.
20. It's so sad that there is a(n) _____ of good live music venues in this town.

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The urge to avoid music that brings up trauma from the past is powerful, but it may be better to 'actively engage'

Nicola Davis
26 July, 2025

- 1 When Bonnie hears the opening bars of the Verve's Bitter Sweet Symphony, she is transported back to 1997. But it isn't a joyful memory that comes to mind; it is the painful recollection of driving home from school and seeing the sheriff changing a lock on her house.
- 2 Then a teenager, Bonnie and her family were about to be evicted. And the Verve's song was everywhere.
- 3 "It was a big hit at the time, and it just seemed to be playing all the time, in takeaway shops and shopping centres, on the radio in the car. I just couldn't get away from this song," she says.
- 4 To this day, the 46-year-old who lives in Canberra, Australia, says she will change the radio or leave the location where the song is playing to avoid hearing it. "The lyrics of this song too closely described our situation," she says.
- 5 Indeed, many people avoid particular tunes because they are attached to the memory of an event that was either upsetting, or was once pleasant but has since become painful to recall.
- 6 For Matt, 52, an engineer in the north of England, the entire oeuvre of Neil Diamond is to be avoided after a partner with a love of the singer confessed to having lied about the nature of a relationship with a colleague.
- 7 "We used to like Friday night kitchen discos. We used to listen to all kinds, and usually Neil Diamond would be on," Matt says, adding his former partner had been to several Neil Diamond concerts, including one with her boss before she met Matt.
- 8 The colleague, the woman insisted, had just been a friend. But after three years in a relationship with Matt, she confessed she had had an affair with her boss while she was married to her former husband and still had feelings for the colleague.
- 9 Now, says Matt, when a Neil Diamond song comes on the radio, he has to skip the track. "If I go into my local pub and it's on the jukebox, I'll go into the other room or go outside," he says.
- 10 According to Ilja Salakka, a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, the relationship between music and memories is linked to emotions.
- 11 "Emotions play a key role in long-lasting memories generally, and since music can evoke strong emotions, it is likely that music can enhance the memory related to an event," he said. "Of course, this can also work in reverse: an event itself may be emotional and strengthen the memory of a situation that involves music."
- 12 Dr Stephanie Leal, an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), said that when emotionally arousing music occurs, or is paired with, an emotional experience, it can be difficult to pin down which is causing the emotion that help instil the memory. "The type of emotional response can really dictate what we're holding on to in our memories," she said.
- 13 In one study, Leal and colleagues found when people listened to music that induced either very strong or very weak emotions, they were better able to remember the gist of an event, whereas they were better able to remember details when they had a more moderate emotional response.
- 14 Salakka added that typically it is music from a listener's teenage years or early adulthood that evokes most memories.
- 15 "[The] majority of memories attached to music tend to be positive in nature," he added. But that is not always the case. "Positive music-related memories are often more general in nature, whereas negative memories tend to be related to more specific events," he said.
- 16 As Matt's experience shows, however, the emotions attached to a song, and its associated memory, can change. "Now it's drawing up negative memories in that [it's] stirring up new emotions that weren't originally there," said Leal.
- 17 While that may seem like the perfect reason to avoid a song, perhaps it could also bring hope. Although experts say there is a dearth of research in the area, they say it could be that listening to a painful song in new, happier contexts could rehabilitate it.
- 18 "If it's a very, very negative association with that song, maybe you'll never get over it," said Leal. "But the way to try is repeating it with new events that do make you happy and to hope that it overpowers and kind of reconnects your brain and rewires it to this new association."
- 19 Prof Renee Timmers of the University of Sheffield added that these new associations must involve strong emotions, ideally occur in a social context, and be meaningful.

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- 20 But Timmers also suggested another potential approach. "Rather than seeing the music as something that is there, you can't do anything with it, and you are the victim of it, you can actually actively engage," she said, adding that could involve humming along or even improvising on the music.
- 21 "Then the music becomes the active thing that you're engaging with, rather than the memory."

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First published in *The Guardian*, 26/07/25

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What memory does Bonnie associate with the song Bitter Sweet Symphony?
2. How might Bonnie react today if she were to hear that same song?
3. Why does Matt have a negative feeling towards all the music by Neil Diamond?
4. How does Matt react when he hears any of Neil Diamond's songs?
5. What does Ilja Salakka say about how music affects our memory of events?
6. What did Dr. Stephanie Leal's study reveal about how different emotional responses to music affect the way we remember events?
7. According to Ilja Salakka, which stage of life provides the music that most strongly evokes memories?
8. What is the difference between positive and negative music-related memories?
9. What does Leal suggest we can do to rehabilitate a painful song?
10. What alternative approach did Prof Renee Timmers recommend for dealing with painful music associations?

4 Key language

a. Categorise the examples of conditionals from the article according to the rules provided.

Zero Conditional: describes what definitely happens in a specific situation or condition.

First Conditional: describes what might happen in the future in a situation or condition.

- a. When Bonnie hears the opening bars of the Verve's Bitter Sweet Symphony, she is transported back to 1997.
- b. If I go into my local pub and it's on the jukebox, I'll go outside.
- c. When a Neil Diamond song comes on the radio, he skips the track.
- d. If it's a very, very negative association with that song, maybe you'll never get over it.

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Zero Conditional (when / if + present simple + present simple)	First Conditional (when / if + present simple + future simple)

b. Complete the zero and first conditionals with the alternatives to *if* and *when*.

- Elephants attack _____ they feel threatened.
a. only if b. whether or not c. in case
- You're free to play any music you want _____ you play it quietly.
a. unless b. even if c. provided
- I'll give information to the police _____ I can remain anonymous.
a. whether or not b. even if c. on condition that
- Don't smoke _____ you have asthma. Smoking is just not healthy.
a. provided that b. whether or not c. supposing
- We will take a jacket to the concert _____ it's cold when we leave.
a. even if b. provided c. in case
- I don't mind how you spend the money _____ you stick to the budget.
a. unless b. in case c. as long as
- Don't call her parents _____ it's absolutely essential.
a. whether or not b. unless c. even if
- The music exam is going to be too difficult. I won't pass _____ I study all night.
a. even if b. as long as c. only if

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c. Finish the sentences below.

Unless I know it is going to be played, I get upset every time I hear _____.

I'll definitely see _____ play live provided _____.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- There is no music that does not have an effect on your emotions.
- Music from your past means more to you than current music.
- Some past events will always have an impact on your current and future life.

6 In your own words

a. Imagine you have a friend who gets upset every time they hear a particular song. Create a flowchart for them that describes step by step what they need to do to change the way they feel about the song. Use these questions to guide your ideas.

- How can you find out about the memory that they associate with the song?
- What effect does the song have on them at the moment?
- What effect do you want the song to have on them?
- What alternative happy situations could they start to associate with the song?
- What would be good ways to hear this song multiple times?
- Who would your friend be happy to spend time with, hearing the song?
- What are some different ways that someone could adapt a song?

b. Present your flowchart and describe the effect that each step will have on someone. Include zero and first conditionals in your description. Here is an example

List out possible negative songs.



Identify one negative song.



Describe the effect of that song.

In order to help a friend identify a negative song that they want to change into a positive song, start by having them list out songs they associate negative memories with. Pick the song with the strongest negative associations. Ask them to describe what happens if they hear the song in public and they are not expecting to hear it.